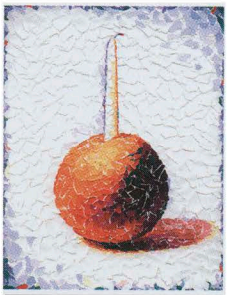

SPACE DOME

Syracuse University's past and present have been well chronicled. Here's a glimpse into its future, a hard-wired wonderland where reality can be virtual but the landmarks endure.

By Michael Martone

Where are you when you are on hold? And when you finally get through to that 800 operator, where do the two of you meet? I always ask now when I order from a catalog or make a reservation. Where are you? The answer comes back: Omaha, say, or Rapid City or some fringe city outside of Atlanta. But we know we are meeting somewhere else, at a crossroads that is becoming quite familiar to us all.

You catch yourself there as you navigate the ever-branching logic trees of your ATM or as you channel surf along coaxial cable or on the beam emanating from a geo-synchronous satellite. I'm there now as I type this essay onto the excitable phosphorescent screen of my computer. Oh sure, we leave the husks of our bodies behind us in the lobby of the bank, in the reclining lounger, in the swivel chair tucked next to my desk, but more and more we all have experienced the sensation of this placelessness where the thinking part of us takes part in what seems like some vast architecture of a much larger overarching mind.

It used to be we talked of the ghost in the machine. These new machines make us conscious of the ghosts within us. We sense those ghosts leaving us, leaving our corporal selves, sparking across the synapses between our fingertips and key pads. Or they depart by way of the breathy current of our voices as our bodies linger in cruise-controlled autos, drifting from cell to cell, along those now old and not-so-super, superhighways. Cyberspace, the novelist William Gibson has dubbed this place, the rooms of virtual reality with their ether of data, plasma of text, atmosphere of simulation. Cyberspace is getting to feel like home. Hold has got a hold on us.

Syracuse University has initiated a *Commitment to Learning* campaign with the goal of raising $300 million by the turn of the century, and this effort has been coupled with a fair amount of speculation about the shape of the University itself in that future. *Syracuse University Magazine* has asked me to imagine the University in the new millennium.

I teach creative writing at the University here and now, and I suspect the editors of this publication envisioned a creative response. Might I cast a landscape akin to the fantasy illustrations of the popular science magazines of my youth, a tomorrow filled with gyrocopters, pneumatic tubing, meals condensed into pills, and the sweeping panoramic vision of a great crystalline domed city. Such musing would provide an antidote, perhaps, to the cut-and-dried development story announcing the fund-raising effort and the practical goals of its funding. But, as science fiction writers are fond of saying, the future ain't what it used to be.

Alas, my imaginative prowess doesn't run along the Jules Vernesque line. I tend, in my own storytelling, to cast tales set in the place where I'm from, Planet Indiana I'm calling it, firmly rooted in the here and now. And it is true, official versions of the University's future are short on the gee-whiz, Buck Rogers kind of creativity. Besides, my taste in the future tends to be apocalyptic in its expression, the anti-utopia of *Blade Runner*, where the nifty video pay phones of tomorrow still are scrawled all over with graffiti. In the University's projection, there is no nostalgia for the future but sober projections from statistical foundations.

Electronic classrooms are projected, of course, crammed with the hard-wired accoutrements of the interactive future, computers with scads of memory modemed to webs and wells, everything one needs in a tastefully appointed node on the net. As I have suggested, this is no giant leap for us to make. Images of such a future are as accessible to us now as the most recent telephone

commercial. Imagine, its talking head prompts, a classroom in the boonies, in Indiana let's say, plugged into the lecture of the foremost authority on this or that. I think we think the Syracuse University classrooms of the future, so wired and equipped, will be the platform from which such lectures are launched, or will be the landing pads for incoming global expertise.

Syracuse is a lot like my hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Both have a similar population and ethnic mix. The cities grew along canals and railroads, and have auto plants and electric companies in their histories. I live in a house here built in the teens of this century at the same time and on the same plans as the one I grew up in, an old four-square design. Daydreaming, I can easily drift back and forth between these places, mistake one for the other, even wake as a child, for a minute, in my old room.

I walk down Euclid Avenue to get to the University, and it is wire that I notice. The utility poles are bearing a bumper crop of cable, wrapped like vines coiling into huge spliced trunks. The telephone and cable television companies have been stringing fiberoptic line, anticipating the synthesis of all our electronic machines—telephone, computer, television, fax—into one new machine. NiMo, the electric company, tends the stringy arbor by topping the overgrown oaks and maples to weave the insulated, high-tension kudzu through the branches.

When I moved to Syracuse this cable canopy registered in my mind as a distinguishing detail of this place. In Fort Wayne, a copy of Syracuse in so many ways, the residential blocks are cut with alleys and the wires are strung on poles behind the garages. Syracuse, for me, will always be the place where the old houses are screened by this grid of the grid.

How do we know where we are? Of course, we notice certain things in our surroundings and store away these orientating details, creating a kind of cognitive map of the place. The urban planner Kevin Lynch in his book, *The Image of the City*, had residents of Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles draw maps and narrate their daily journeys through their cities. Lynch paid attention to the references that overlapped, the landmarks most people steer by, and discovered whole regions of the cities that were invisible even to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods. He attempted to articulate principles of our recognition. He noticed, for instance, that Bostonians tended to draw the Charles River first, and that the citizens of that city liked to imagine their Boston, in their own minds, from across that river, a sweeping panorama in which they also imagined themselves enmeshed.

In all the talk of Syracuse University's future there is not much print spent on the physical feel of this place. The focus of this campaign is not to raise money to raise new buildings. Lynch's work points out that the connections we make with our surroundings are stored deep in our memories, so deep, it seems, that the particulars approach a kind of an invisibility. Our surroundings become a steady state of sensual bombardment, and, as the old song says, we don't know what we've got 'til it's gone.

The University, we know, will be student centered, but where will the student be centered? Remember that the revolution in electronic media, also spelled out in our future, may render the idea of going any *place* obsolete. So why come to Syracuse? What is the *where* here? Where is the *here* here?

I'd like to nominate the idea of the Dome to answer those questions. That is, I like the Dome as an idea, a metaphor perhaps, that represents this place and its future.

As an idea, let's begin with basics. Because it is an unsupported roof, the pressurized atmosphere propping up the ceiling, there is a simple elegance to its implication. The Dome defines an open space while at the same time that open space defines the Dome.

To be in the Dome when it is empty of other people is to catch a fleeting sensation of space itself. The scale of the Dome is large enough to suggest your true size in relationship to the greater sphere outside the Dome, and yet the limits of this Dome are perceptible. The translucent billow of the ceiling appears, simultaneously, invisible and sheltering. It is architecture expressed simply, a space defined by a single element—one circular wall that arches overhead everywhere—and its very simplicity suggests the profound complexity of the notion of "space" and of our relationships to it—outside and inside, here and there, small and large.

Of course, the Dome, on less abstract terms, encapsulates this University. Filled to capacity with the fans of football games or Commencement exercises, it defines the community by containing so many of its members at one time. Little wonder that this space within the larger space of the campus registers on the cognitive maps of its inhabitants. Everyone, sooner or later, dances across its ceremonial floor in the strange ritual garb of tuxedos, plaid field hockey skirts, academic robes, or band busbies.

The Dome serves as an orienting landmark in our minds as it also serves as the actual site of orientation for the prospective students who graze the gridiron on campus tours or the matriculating freshmen who take their bearings on arrival. This is the place. This is the hive into which you have entered. This is the concave lens that magnifies your own daily efforts, blends them into a focal point with the ordinary diverse energy being generated from the busy mass of people all around you.

That's the inside. Outside, the Dome, as a building, always seems to brood behind the University's skyline, to hover just out of reach. Its roof floats like the balloon it is, caught fleetingly it seems, wedged between the sharp vertical edges of the University's other buildings. Standing on the Quad, your gaze can take in all of Hendricks Chapel, with its silver dome, or the old Carnegie Library, with its domed cupolas. But behind each perspective is a fragment of the Dome, levitating like a cartoon-thought bubble above our heads.

The other day, the quilting of the Dome's roof draped above Archbold Gymnasium made me think of the foremost tops and flying gallants of the old tall ships, their metropolis of sails. Or, as my gaze fell back down to earth, I thought, yes, that slice of the roof could be the rounded back of a sounding whale. Look, the reinforcing ribs and lightning vanes could be the debris of harpoons and lines scoring the flanks of the Great White Whale. Melville mused on the whiteness of that whale. Here the Dome takes on the role of transubstantiation. The whiteness of the Dome. A cloud. A snow drift. Mushroom. The moon rising in our midst. A fissured skull. Trampoline. Marshmallow. Down comforter. The Dome is an eerie presence, attractive and unknowable, hidden and dominating. It functions as the blank projection screen of our daydreams, its otherworldliness a locus for our imagination. The thing itself could be an icon for the brain.

From the elevated highways running through the city, the whole sweeping curve of the Dome can be seen as a kind of shell scalloped behind the towers of the Hall of Languages and Crouse College. Or you can see it another way. The Dome isn't fanned out behind the skyline like a screen. The Dome's outline is really tracing another dome, much bigger and transparent, that now seems to enclose the whole campus. It turns out

then my vision of this place has included one of those old time science-fiction vistas, the domed city on the hill, which encompasses both the founding Methodists' own visions of the future and those from the pulp fiction of the fifties.

The campus is pleasant to look at from any angle. The hill it rests on, is, itself, dome-shaped, and the Dome upon it mirrors the surrounding ring of domed drumlins. Every picture of the campus must be composed around the Dome, its centerpiece, its pinnacle, our own unmelted snow-capped cap.

Wherever he moves, David Hamilton, a professor at the University of Iowa, notices that residents of a place ask an indigenous question. When he was in Charlottesville, he told me the question was, *What church will you be attending?* When he moved to the University of Michigan, people asked, *What work do you do?* And when he moved to Iowa, he was asked, *What do you garden?* Syracuse's indigenous question must have to do with the weather, with winter specifically. In practical and functional terms, the Dome's construction was a response to the climate, perhaps more that than anything else. It is a complicated answer to our own indigenous question.

In lighter moments, as I am rushing along Route 690, I imagine that domed campus on the hill I see in the distance as one of those souvenir snow globes. I place a Plexiglas bubble above it all, and those lake-effect flakes which seem to appear spontaneously out of the liquid air around us, a localized blizzard. Our igloo. That's how it feels here in Syracuse, doesn't it? The roofs we throw up over us are roofed themselves by something larger, this particular dome of saturated sky, this unique vault of frescoed clouds.

The space I have been writing about is not cyberspace. It is the old-fashioned kind, cobbled out of old physical material, bricks and mortar and their high-tech yet humble descendants—steel and nylon, concrete and plastic. Once such old-fashioned space was new. The Romans, when they built the first dome, thought they had defined space itself, meta-space, in a building. The Pantheon, they hoped, contained all of heaven under its dome, or, probably closer to the truth, contained the desire to contain all of heaven.

People have been fashioning new spaces forever. The most recent expansive configuration, now expressed in the paradox of miniaturization, has given us this seemingly infinite accordion sensation of space. There are rooms within rooms within rooms within rooms in cyberspace. And it is interesting to note that this new space uses the old metaphors of rooms and roads to help us navigate within it and through it.

Of course, in all of this space, it is the orchestration of meeting that becomes important.

Keep that orchestration in mind. You will better understand the seemingly modest goals the University has of identifying certain creative combinations of teacher and learner, its objectives of finding a particular kind of student, and its desires to sustain such contact through an array of financial and material support. It assumes without question (I have brought the question up here) the inherent value of face-to-face meetings, and does so in the face of new technologies that make

other inter-faces readily possible.

The happy babbling heads we meet as artfully arranged pixels on our television screens keep telling us that the only space that matters is the expanse beneath the domes of our skulls. That's where the action is. Reality, virtual or not, takes place there in the gelatinous matter between our ears. The question at hand, so to speak, is where is the mind? The boosters of a cybernetic future are rooting for the brain alone. They might be right. Let's say they are right. Then, even before all the newfangled hardware, we were already walled up in the bounded precincts of our own consciousness.

Universities have always been about the demolition of those walls and the creation of a space hospitable to a variety of experience. You can think of the university as a machine as well, a huge one, one that resists reinforcing the solipsistic tendencies wired into us, while it amplifies the social ones. The university is a space that makes room for minds to meet and defines the mind as that dialectic bundle of brain and body.

Kevin Lynch, in his books about the notion of place, suggests why students in the future will continue to come to places like Syracuse. A place, he points out, emerges within a component of time that is shared by a cohort of contemporaries. There are bands of graduates roaming the earth now whose sense of Syracuse is a shared reference point in time. To some it might be the wire-lined streets of the neighborhood before the dorms were built. To others it could be the little amphitheater of heather and limestone commemorating the victims of Pan Am Flight 103.

To both groups, the sense of "Syracuse" will be vastly different, but for both, "Syracuse" will be created from their particular time here. For others it might be the brick lobby of the Schine Student Center, the steps of Hendricks Chapel, a booth at the Varsity, a table on the ground floor of Bird, or even the computer cluster in HBC. The intersection of lives leaves a residue in this non-virtual reality. Evidence of such shared experience is erased in cyberspace, is, by definition, cyberspace. Nothing and no one is left to mark the shared passage.

Take Holden Observatory, another dome. It is one of those landmarks that marks a place in time. To some graduates it figures as a classroom, to others a ruin. The building has even been moved like a castle on a chessboard. Ironic, no? A building built to fix time and space itself involved in moving, literally and metaphorically, in time and space. Today the observatory is home to the computer-bound Soling Program, perhaps a working model for the University's future, groups of students and professors rearranging the space of the classroom through collaborative and community work. I went to look under the old dome of that building. The telescope is long gone, its efficacy washed out by the city's lights. Its one big room now hosts teams of students and faculty who report to each other their interdisciplinary journeys out into the world. It is as if the building's original purpose has been turned inside out. The observatory now encompasses both inner and outer space and the lenses have been trained on the city lights below the hill. Here is a new nexus being built where a community is making a time and place.

I have dwelt on the Dome for what it might symbolize as well as what it is. A dome, by definition, is a covered space with no obstructing support. Our Dome is that sheltered egalitarian arena where each of us can dance our dance. I am attracted to the bulk of the Dome, to its physical presence and airy emptiness. It seems at once ancient and futuristic. It makes me think of space and how space metamorphoses into place. And this place, Syracuse, is where I find myself staring at a screen into my future, still attached to this old, old architecture of flesh and bone. ■

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